

Last month, Dr. Fauci said:

It's less likely for a child to get infected in the school setting than if they were just in the community.

But Big Labor special interests didn't appreciate science undercutting their political goals. The empire struck back, and the Democratic leaders who love to claim the mantle of science ran away from the science as fast as they could. Now the CDC Director admits that "the lived experiences"—whatever that is—of government employees got between the hard science and the final guidance. It is a lot of points for cancer.

The unions had spoken. The goalposts were on the move. And the White House keeps endorsing the idea that schools need the Democrats' new spending plan to reopen, when the science disagrees. And furthermore, just 5 percent—5 percent—of what they propose to spend on schools would even be spent this year. Let me say that again. In this big COVID package, only 5 percent of what they propose to spend on schools would be spent this year. In other words, the spendout is over years ahead. You would think their view is, we are never going to get over the coronavirus.

The United Kingdom just announced they will have kids back in school in less than 2 weeks—2 weeks. Countries like Spain and France have had kids in classrooms for months already. The European Centre for Disease Prevention has no problem affirming the science—that closing schools is "unlikely to provide significant additional protection of children's health." Even here at home, private and religious schools have been teaching kids in person for months without causing any explosion in the spread of the virus.

Science tells us unambiguously that in-person schooling can be quite safe and that having young children spend all day staring into a laptop is a nightmare. The evidence is crystal clear. Big Labor bureaucrats keep refusing to follow the science.

In my hometown of Louisville, our union-backed school board vice chairman now asserts, with no evidence:

I think we're probably likely to see better instructional outcomes . . . if we stay [remote] for the rest of the school year.

Ridiculous. No facts. No evidence. Just a personal whim. These are the people controlling our kids' futures and their parents' lives.

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By the way, failing grades in middle schools are up 388 percent in our county. Failing grades in middle schools are up 388 percent in our county while these kids are stuck at home.

The Biden administration has a clear obligation to tackle the special interest madness head-on. Our kids are suffering, not because science says they must be—it doesn't. It is just because a small group of powerful grownups has decided they prefer it this way. Instead, the White House keeps parroting the anti-science myths. They back this notion that schools need the Democrats' new spending plan before they can reopen, except that science completely disagrees—completely; except that only a tiny fraction of the funding request would even be spent this fiscal year.

Our children's futures are literally at stake. The administration has got to stop taking orders from the public sector unions that give generously to Democratic campaigns. This is exhibit A in why relief legislation must be targeted to the actual needs we face now. American families should be the starting point, not preconceived political priorities.

NOMINATION OF XAVIER BECERRA

Now, Mr. President, on one related matter, today, our colleagues on the HELP Committee will question Xavier Becerra, President Biden's nominee to run the Department of Health and Human Services.

Amid a global pandemic, the President has made a puzzling selection for this crucial post: the famously partisan attorney general of California. Mr. Becerra has no particular experience or expertise in health. His chief passion project in California seemed to be using the force of the government to attack Americans' religious liberty and freedom of conscience.

In 2017, the Department he is nominated to lead finally provided a religious exemption to a controversial ObamaCare mandate. Mr. Becerra led the lawsuit to challenge it. He used his taxpayer-funded office to sue Catholic nuns who didn't want government to force them to violate their beliefs. This is a pattern with Mr. Becerra. When a California law forcing pro-life crisis pregnancy centers to advertise abortion was challenged in court, Mr. Becerra defended it to the bitter end.

His absurd position in favor of government-compelled speech was slapped down by the Supreme Court. Over the last 2 years, the HHS Office for Civil Rights literally has had to hold California and Mr. Becerra in violation of conscience protections that are actually written into Federal law. His zealous refusal to respect the citizens' legal rights positioned his State to potentially forfeit hundreds of millions of dollars in HHS funding. That is how committed they were to these violations. And now the fox wants to guard the henhouse?

We will review Mr. Becerra's testimony today, but I am hard-pressed to see any way such a radical and underqualified nominee should fill such a critical post at this crucial time.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. PADILLA). The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, in his inaugural address, President Biden spoke about his desire to unify.

He said this:

Today, on this January day, my whole soul is in this: bringing America together, uniting our people, uniting our nation.

Admirable words, but words have to be met with action, and, right now, we are not seeing much of an attempt to unify from the President or his party. In fact, we are seeing pretty much the opposite. The Democrats have made it very clear they are determined to pass another COVID bill on a purely partisan basis, which is particularly disappointing because, up until now, COVID relief has been a bipartisan process. That is right. To date, Congress has passed five COVID relief bills, and every single one of those bills has been overwhelmingly bipartisan.

I might add, last year, when we were in the majority, Senate Democrats made it very clear that they thought the minority should have a voice in COVID relief and that any legislation should reflect the thoughts of both parties. The Democratic leader filibustered the CARES Act—our largest COVID relief bill—multiple times until he got a version that he was satisfied with, but now that the Democrats are in the majority, apparently, they have decided that it is their way or the highway. Forget the fact that the Senate is evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats. The Democrats are determined to ensure that the Republicans and the Americans they represent don't have a voice in this bill.

The Democrats' move to use reconciliation to force through a purely partisan COVID bill might be understandable—and I add "might"—if the Republicans had made it clear that we opposed doing anything else on COVID, but that couldn't be further from the truth. The Republicans have made it very clear that we are willing to work with the Democrats on additional targeted relief. Just weeks ago, 10 Republican Senators put together a plan and met with President Biden for 2 hours to discuss a bipartisan agreement, but while the President certainly listened to them graciously, it quickly became clear that their efforts didn't matter. It didn't matter how willing the Republicans were to negotiate; the Democrats had no intention of reaching an agreement. They wanted to go it alone, and they were not going to let the Republicans stop them.

In a speech a few days ago, President Biden acknowledged that people have criticized his \$1.9 trillion plan but asked:

What would they have me cut? What would they have me leave out?